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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/04/2017

TAGS: PREL PTER KPAL EG IS

SUBJECT: GOE WORRIED ABOUT MORE HAJJ PILGRIMS THROUGH
RAFAH; SEEKS TO ACTIVATE LIAISON CHANNEL

REF: A. CAIRO 3369

1B. CAIRO 3262

1C. CAIRO 3309

Classified By: DCM Stuart Jones for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary. Egyptian MFA and MOD contacts confirmed to us today that approximately 500 Palestinians entered Egypt from Gaza on December 3. The GOE maintains that only Palestinians holding valid Saudi Arabian Hajj visas were allowed to enter, and that these travelers have been bused to the Egyptian Red Sea port of Nuweiba. Between 30-50 Palestinians were refused entry and returned to Gaza, according to the GOE. In addition, approximately 1500 Palestinians with Saudi visas intending to make the Hajj pilgrimage are located either at Rafah crossing or nearby in Gaza. The MFA understands that these pilgrims may be allowed to travel via Erez crossing, pending an Israeli-Palestinian Authority agreement, but that nothing is final. The GOE remains worried, and is seeking to activate the LAWIO-ILO liaison channel, with USG officers present, to address the situation. End summary.

12. (C) On December 4, officials from the Directorate of Military Intelligence (DMI) told us that approximately 450 pilgrims crossed the border at Rafah on December 3; MFA Director of Palestinian Affairs Badr Abdelatty told us the same on December 4. In addition, approximately 1500 Palestinians are currently waiting to be admitted to Egypt so that they can travel on to Saudi Arabia for the Hajj. The GOE has told us that only those with valid Saudi visas will be allowed into Egypt. DMI Chief MG Mowafy told us December 4 that these Palestinians were already in the Rafah terminal; Abdelatty was unsure if they were presently at the crossing, but said they no doubt intended to enter Egypt via Rafah. He said that this could potentially be avoided if the Israelis agreed with the PA for legitimate pilgrims to enter via Erez, something he understood was under discussion. Mowafy said that this group of intending travelers does not include any "undesirable people."

13. (C) When pressed on how the Palestinians got their Saudi visas, a DMI official said that they "must have" been obtained in Jordan and then smuggled into Gaza through Israel. MG Mowafy denied press reports that the passports had been smuggled into Egypt via a tunnel and then returned. DMI's Chief of the Liaison Agency with International Organizations MG Nagy Kamal said that the approximately 450

Palestinians that had crossed at Rafah on December 3 included pilgrims as well as students and people needing urgent medical care. Nagy also noted that the travelers were primarily "over 60" years old. (Note: Photos of the crossing supplied by EUBAM contradict this claim. End note.)

MG Nagy said that the Palestinian Embassy had chartered buses to take the Palestinians to the port city of Nuweiba, where they will board ferries to Saudi Arabia.

¶4. (S) MG Mowafy stressed to us that he had been warning us (reflets) of the potential border problem for weeks and said he fears that should they turn the pilgrims back, the Palestinians will blow a hole in the wall and come through. He told the Ambassador that Egypt cannot afford political violence that could ensue from blocking the Hajjis and insisted this would not be in Palestinian or Israeli interests either. Mowafy reiterated GOE willingness to meet with U.S. and Israeli officials to discuss border issues (Ref A), including the current Rafah situation. Mowafy called the Ambassador personally to apologize for not granting our DATT permission to observe subsequent border crossings on security grounds. He further sought the Ambassador's support for establishing a trilateral conversation urgently. MG Nagy said that when he called his GOI counterpart on November 29 to request a liaison channel meeting, the official said he "did not have orders" to agree to a meeting and said there would need to be bilateral meetings before a meeting with U.S. officials present.

¶5. (C) Comment: The GOE has been warning of a Hajj-driven border crisis for weeks. They believe that handling the travelers in an orderly manner through the Rafah terminal is the least bad option available, given the security and public opinion problems associated with turning back Hajj pilgrims.

The current situation is ripe for further exploitation by Hamas, but the Egyptians, Israelis, and Palestinian Authority may still have a chance to come to agreement on how to facilitate movement of the remaining Hajj pilgrims in Gaza. We recommend activation of the emergency LAWIO-ILO liaison channel with U.S. participation, if both the Israelis and Egyptians agree. We will face the reverse situation in two weeks when these pilgrims seek to return to Gaza.
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